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Issues in Human Sexuality

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Authors	Church of England
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Church of England

Issues in Human Sexuality

The Gospels provide little evidence that Jesus said much about sexuality in his teaching. Nevertheless Christians have tended to be identified as people who have a great deal to say about sex - much of it very negative. There is no doubt that the Church's understanding of the place of sex in God's created order has developed significantly, particularly in the last 50 years.

CONTRACEPTION

In 1908 the Bishops of the Anglican Communion meeting at the Lambeth Conference declared that:-

'the Conference records with alarm the growing practice of the artificial restriction of the family and earnestly calls upon all Christian people to discountenance the use of all artificial means of restriction as demoralising to character and hostile to national welfare'.

Some of the Church opposition at this time reflected a national concern about falling birth rates. By the 1920s, certain sections of the Church were beginning to develop a richer understanding of sexuality. Sexual love came to be seen as good not just because it enabled the human race to reproduce itself. Sexual love was good in itself, and it provided an essential way for a husband and wife to express and strengthen their love for each other. In the Garden of Eden God had said, 'It is not good that the man (Adam) should be alone' (Genesis 2:18). It was also argued that people were limiting their families in order to give children a better chance of success. The debate makes fascinating reading and went on through the 1920s until the Lambeth Conference of 1930. The 1930 resolution was greeted with mixed reactions and reads as follows:

'Where there is a clearly felt moral obligation to limit or avoid parenthood, complete abstinence is the primary and obvious method.'

but if there was morally sound reasoning for avoiding abstinence

'the Conference agrees that other methods may be used, provided that this is done in the light of Christian principles'.

By the 1958 Lambeth Conference, contraception was an accepted part of life among most Anglicans, and a resolution was passed to the effect that the responsibility for deciding upon the number and frequency of children was laid by God upon the consciences of parents 'in such ways as are acceptable to husband and wife'.

In 1968, the Conference considered the Papal Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* and while recording their appreciation of the Pope's deep concern for the institution of marriage and family life, the Bishops disagreed with his idea that methods of contraception other than abstinence and the rhythm method are contrary to the will of God.

The contrast between the Anglican position and the official Roman Catholic position (reiterated on many occasions by Pope John Paul II in the years following *Humanae Vitae*) illustrates, in part, different ways of approaching questions of Moral Theology. Roman Catholics have tended to look to the 'Magisterium', the official teaching of the Church, typically articulated by the Pope, as the

source of authority on moral, as in doctrinal, questions. Anglicans have tended to call on 'Scripture, Tradition, and Reason'. Increasingly these approaches are being supplemented by appeals to 'human experience'. It is clear, for example, that the experience of Christian married people in relation to contraception explains some of the change in Anglican thinking between 1930 and 1958.

Further reading:

A book entitled **Contraception** (John T Noonan Jnr, 1965, Harvard University Press) contains a survey of the history of attitudes towards the subject and is still worth reading.

For an indication of some Roman Catholic thinking from a distinguished Roman Catholic moral theologian (although not an 'official' spokesperson) see **Life and Love: Towards a Christian Dialogue on Bioethical Questions** by Kevin Kelly (Collins, 1987) and **New Directions in Moral Theology: The Challenge of Being Human** also by Kevin Kelly (Geoffrey Chapman, 1992), especially Chapter 4, 'In the Light of Experience: Morality and Change'.

HOMOSEXUALITY

The Church of England, like other Churches and the wider society, has found the issue of homosexuality a difficult one to discuss. The most helpful survey can be found in a book published by Peter Coleman (then Bishop of Crediton), **Gay Christians: A Moral Dilemma** (SCM, 1989)

In 1979 a Working Party appointed by the BSR produced a report entitled **Homosexual Relationships: A Contribution to Discussion**. After discussion by the Board the report was debated by the General Synod on 27 February 1981. The Board made it clear that while it welcomed the report as a contribution to discussion it did not endorse its contents. The Synod agreed to 'take note' of the report.

In 1987 Bishop Hugh Montefiore, the Chairman of the Board, secured the agreement of the Standing Committee of the House of Bishops to his suggestion that the Board should appoint a Working Party to advise the bishops. The terms of reference were:

- i. To review current thinking about the nature and practice of homosexuality and lesbianism and how the Churches have responded to these matters.
- ii. To consider the method and content of Christian theology and ethics as they relate to these issues.
- iii. To advise the House of Bishops how to handle homosexuality matters in the Church of England.

It was understood that, although the report was to be produced by a Working Party of the Board for Social Responsibility, it would be submitted to the House of Bishops. There was no assumption that it would be published.

Whilst this work was underway a quite separate development occurred. A Private Member's motion in the name of the Revd Tony Higon (the founder of Action for Biblical Witness to Our Nation (ABWON)) was debated in the General Synod in November 1987. Although the motion referred to several aspects of sexuality, the considerable interest of the mass media was focused almost entirely on the issue of homosexuality and, in particular, the position of the clergy. After a lively debate an amendment to the motion, moved on behalf of the House of Bishops by the Bishop of Chester, was accepted:

'This Synod affirms that the biblical and traditional teaching on chastity and fidelity in personal relationships is a response to, and expression of, God's love for each one of us, and in particular affirms:

1. that sexual intercourse is an act of total commitment which belongs properly within a permanent married relationship;
2. that fornication and adultery are sins against this ideal, and are to be met by a call to repentance and the exercise of compassion;
3. that homosexual genital acts also fall short of this ideal, and are likewise to be met by a call to repentance and the exercise of compassion;
4. that all Christians are called to be exemplary in all spheres of morality, including sexual morality, and that holiness of life is particularly required of Christian leaders.'

The motion was carried with voting as follows:

Ayes	403
Noes	8
Abstentions	13

At the end of 1988, the BSR report on homosexuality was delivered to the House of Bishops. The bishops decided that it would not be helpful to publish the report, although they acknowledged the help the report had given them in their own thinking. Instead, they set up a small group of their own to reflect further on the issue. In February 1989 a copy of the BSR report was leaked to the Press. There was some public discussion of the report although it remains officially unpublished. In December 1991, the result of the work of the House of Bishops group was published as a Statement by the House of Bishops, *Issues in Human Sexuality* (CHP, 1991).

As its title suggested the bishops sought to place a discussion of the particular issue of homosexuality into the wider context of Christian reflection on human sexuality in general. In his Preface, the Archbishop of Canterbury highlighted a paragraph in the Statement which said that the purpose had been 'to promote an educational process as a result of which Christians may both become more informed about and understanding of certain human realities, and also to enter more deeply into the wisdom of their inheritance of faith in this field'. The bishops have therefore called for a wide process of discussion and reflection, particularly by small groups at parish and deanery level. The report is divided into five chapters: 1) an introduction which explains the context of the discussion and why it is important; 2) the Bible's treatment of human sexuality and ways of understanding it; 3) the Christian vision for human sexuality; 4) homosexual love; and 5) the Church's rules and discipline. The statement treats human sexuality in a very positive way. It recognises that Christians are divided in their view of homosexuality in particular. They emphasise that Christians must reject all forms of hatred of homosexual people. They should protect those who are victimised. The bishops conclude, however, that the clergy are called to 'a different standard' from lay people. But the bishops emphasise again the need for further discussion. Once the results of such discussion have been evaluated the bishops will consider whether a further statement is required. For the moment the 1991 statement may be regarded as the most authoritative Church of England position on the subject.

SEXUAL ETHICS

There have been a number of other debates in the General Synod relating to general aspects of human sexuality. These took place in November 1977, July 1978 and November 1979. In November 1989 a Private Member's Motion in the name of Mr Trevor Stevenson was debated and the following motion was carried:

'That this Synod expresses its support for Members of Parliament engaged in efforts to deal with the problem of decadent attitudes towards women and sexuality that are spreading and growing in our society'.

In July 1997 the General Synod debated Issues in Human Sexuality. The text of the Motion carried was as follows:

'That this Synod:

- a. commend for discussion in dioceses the House of Bishops' report *Issues in Human Sexuality* and acknowledge it is not the last word on the subject;
- b. in particular, urge deanery synods, clergy chapters and congregations to find time for prayerful study and reflection on the issues addressed by the report.'

Further Reading and Resources:

The Homosexual Way: A Christian Option by David Field, (Grove Ethics Series , available from Grove Books).

Homosexuality: Finding the Way of Truth and Love, Cambridge Papers Vol 3, no 2, available from Cambridge Papers, 41 London Road, Stapleford, Cambridge CB2 5DE.

Other Churches in this country have also produced documents on the subject. The principal ones are a Methodist report, published in 1990, entitled ***Report of the Commission on Human Sexuality*** available from the Methodist Publishing House, 20 Ivatt Way, Peterborough PE3 7PG: ***Homosexuality: A Christian View***, published by the United Reformed Church, 86 Tavistock Place, London SW1H 9RT in 1991: ***Human Sexuality***, report to the 1994 General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, available from Christine Gibbs, Social Interest Officer, Church of Scotland Board for Social Responsibility, Charis House, 47 Milton Road East, Edinburgh EH15 2SR.

Care Trust, 53 Romney Street, London SW1P 4RF

Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement, Oxford House, Derbyshire Street, London E2 6HG

Institute for the Study of Christianity & Sexuality, Oxford House, Derbyshire Street, London E2 6H

SEX OFFENDERS

A paper was issued by the Board for Social Responsibility in 1999 entitled *Meeting the Challenge: How Churches Should Respond to Sex Offenders*. You can download the full text of this paper by clicking [here](#). The child protection policy statement and the confidential declaration referred to in the document are available by clicking [here](#).